Evading Accountability: Examining the Climate Impact of Corporate Giants

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Image of nuclear power plants emitting carbon dioxide. (Photo courtesy of the Our World magazine)

Across the globe, people are feeling the heat, literally and figuratively, as the reality of our warming planet becomes impossible to ignore. From wildfires raging out of control in California to glaciers melting at an alarming rate in Antarctica, the signs are everywhere.

We citizens are trying to do our part. Whether recycling more or using less water or plastic, we are all taking steps towards sustainability. However, despite our efforts, the shadow of climate change looms larger than ever.

The U.N. Secretary-General, António Guterres, said that "the era of global warming has ended" and "the era of global boiling has arrived."

The reality is that while our efforts make a difference, they are relatively small compared to the impact of corporations with extensive environmental footprints. For example, Coca-Cola's operations emitted approximately 5.56 million metric tons of greenhouse gasses in 2022, equivalent to the emissions from about 1.21 million passenger vehicles annually.

To tackle these problems, the U.S. has set various environmental regulations on businesses. Environmental regulations, like the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, National Environmental Policy Act and Energy Independence and Security Act, are pivotal in guiding businesses toward sustainability. These laws aim to reduce air and water pollution, assess the environmental impacts of projects and promote energy efficiency and renewable energy use.

The Clean Air Act, for example, is a comprehensive federal law in the United States that regulates air emissions from stationary and mobile sources to control air pollution. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency report, by 2020, these amendments will have prevented over 230,000 early deaths.

Companies have found ways to work around these regulations. Looking back to Volkswagen in 2015, the EPA found that the company used software in millions of diesel vehicles worldwide to cheat on emissions tests, emitting up to 40 times the legally allowed levels of pollutants. They were fined almost $30 billion for the case.Advertisement. Scroll to continue reading.

Other companies have misled the public through greenwashing. Greenwashing is when companies present themselves as more environmentally friendly or sustainable than they are through exaggerated or false claims in their sustainability reporting. Shell, an oil giant responsible for single-handedly causing 1 percent of the pollution worldwide, asked its followers on X what they would change to reduce emissions.

Another example is Delta Air Lines, accused of misleading consumers with its "carbon neutral" claims. This lawsuit suggested that the company's efforts might not be as effective or genuine as advertised in mitigating its environmental impact.

Commercial airplanes contribute 4 percent to the overall yearly emissions. While less than 1 percent of the world population owns private jets, they create 5 to 14 times more emissions than commercial planes.

Last month, more than 1000 private jets flocked to Las Vegas to watch the Super Bowl. Taylor Swift's private jet alone produced 576 times the carbon dioxide emitted by the average American.

While these corporations and celebrities play a major role in global warming, they rarely take accountability. Consumers have been pressured to take responsibility for these powerful corporations while they swiftly dodge any criticism that comes their way.

In 2017, Leonardo DiCaprio was named a United Nations Messenger of Peace with a special focus on climate change. He urged fans to go on plant-based diets while going to receive his environmental award on a private jet. Advertisement. Scroll to continue reading.

Businesses have navigated the legal framework due to various factors, such as the high costs of compliance, lack of enforcement, the potential impact on their competitiveness and the complexity or ambiguity of the regulations themselves. Companies continue to weigh the cost of following environmental standards against the benefits and often choose short-term financial gains over long-term sustainability. In some cases, it's cheaper for corporations to pay the fines for regulation violations than adhere to them, something oil refineries in the U.S. have openly been doing.

Lemir Teron, an associate professor in the Department of Earth, Environment, and Equity, shared more on the matter.

"A major challenge among others is the inordinate political influence of the fossil fuel sector that disables a more rapid transition by increased investment and policy actions and standards regarding renewables, weatherization and climate-responsible energy strategies," he said.

In the U.S., political influence impacts the passage and enforcement of environmental regulation laws, often stalling progress on climate change initiatives. This contrasts with many other parts of the world, where there's generally more consensus on the urgency of addressing climate issues. The lobbying efforts of fossil fuel industries, combined with a politically divided landscape, slowed the adoption of stringent climate policies in the U.S., which have stalled the progress that we could have made so far.

We have seen the effects of such heavy political influence on the EPA as well. In 2022, the Supreme Court limited the EPA's power to put state-level caps on carbon emissions from power plants. Such decisions discourage corporations and plants from finding other sustainable energy sources.

Carbon emissions disproportionately affect fenceline communities and third-world countries due to their closer proximity to pollution sources and lower capacity to mitigate or adapt to the impacts. These communities often lack the infrastructure and resources to deal with health and environmental challenges posed by air pollution. Without effective policies in place, such communities are at risk of being trampled by exploitative businesses. Advertisement. Scroll to continue reading.

"I think it's hypocritical that first-world leaders hold these conventions on their sustainable goals and net-zero targets," said Niharika Mishra, a junior majoring in Computer Information Systems . "They do a lot of virtue signaling while failing to come up with policies that would help vulnerable communities that are the most affected by global warming."

Additionally, third-world countries may face more severe consequences of climate change without the means for effective response, further exacerbating the social and economic disparities they face while being exploited for their resources.

To combat this, prioritizing renewable energy sources like solar panels and wind turbines is incredibly important; enhancing energy efficiency and investing in green technology can significantly lower emissions. Innovations in carbon capture and storage, as well as advancements in agricultural tech, are also key.

Using data analytics and artificial intelligence to optimize energy use and reduce waste can significantly contribute to sustainability efforts. While electric vehicles and electricity-based technology are more sustainable than conventional technologies and vehicles, more can be done.

"Tech will have to be a part of lowering emissions and staving off climate change, but we can't fall into the trap that 'tech fixes everything,' as opposed to cutting emissions and lowering energy consumption. At some point, you have to have a responsible energy diet as opposed to chasing the next fad," Teron said.

Strengthening environmental regulations and closing loopholes will ensure corporations are held accountable for their environmental impact. Engaging in international cooperation to share knowledge and resources is critical for global progress. Additionally, empowering local communities through education and resources will enable them to advocate for and implement sustainable practices, ensuring a collective movement towards a more sustainable future for our planet.Advertisement. Scroll to continue reading.

As we stand at the crossroads of environmental sustainability and corporate accountability, it's clear that change is not just necessary-it's urgent. Collectively, we need to demand stricter enforcement of environmental laws and push for policies that prioritize the planet over profit. It's time for individuals, communities and nations to hold corporations accountable, support sustainable practices and invest in renewable energy.

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